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SUBJECT: IRAN'S HIGH RISK, HIGH REWARD MEDIA MINEFIELD - AN
INSIDER'S VIEW

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CLASSIFIED BY: Ramin Asgard, Director, Iran Regional Presence
Office, DOS.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (S) Summary: Hassan Fahs [strictly protect], former Al-Arabiyya bureau chief in Tehran, and Mazen Hayek, the Group Director of Marketing of Middle East Broadcasting Center, Al-Arabiyya's parent company, both attribute Fahs' recent expulsion from Iran to political motivations. Fahs repeatedly declined overtures to cooperate with the Ministry of Information and Security (MOIS) and was advised to leave soon after he fired suspected MOIS operatives at the bureau. Hayek says Iranian authorities were specifically upset over Al-Arabiyya's allegedly biased coverage of Hizbollah and Hamas that compromised Iran's reputation. The persecution of foreign journalists by Iranian authorities is becoming commonplace, and reflects the Iranian government's stringent efforts to control information into and out of Iran. End Summary.

Al Arabiyya Tehran Bureau Chief Pays Price for Integrity

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¶2. (S) IRPO Director first met on 9/11 with Hassan Fahs, the former Al-Arabiyya bureau chief in Tehran who departed Iran abruptly the previous week after allegedly receiving threats from the Iranian government. Fas had spent the past eight years in Iran, and outlined his experience. Fas came to Iran in 2000 from his native Lebanon, where he hailed from a prominent Shia clerical family, and enrolled in graduate studies in journalism. The Iranian MOIS first approached him at this time to forge a relationship, which he refused. Later, Fahs sought to pursue a doctorate, and the MOIS contacted him again, and told him that continuing his studies was conditional on his cooperation. He again refused, and was forced to abandon his doctoral studies. He continued to work in journalism and as a commentator on regional issues from Tehran with Al-Hayat, Al-Hurra and other media outlets.

¶3. (S) When he took over as Al-Arabiyya's Tehran bureau chief, he surmised that three of his employees appeared to be working for Iranian intelligence. One of these, he maintained, he recognized as a member of Lebanese Hizbollah. After firing these suspected MOIS operatives, he noticed that his home and movements were being closely monitored, and he started to receive threatening calls. Then at a reception which included Iranian government staffers, a senior aide to President Ahmadinejad advised, "if I were you, I'd pack my bags and leave Iran." Fahs listened and departed the next day.

14. (S) During our first discussion, Fahs appeared in fair spirits, despite the harrowing circumstances of his situation. He had come to Dubai with his daughter, and was on his way to Lebanon to leave her there with his family. He was concerned, though, that he might be targeted by Hizbollah when he returned to Beirut. When we spoke a few weeks later, Fas was still working on getting his wife and other child out of Iran. While in Dubai, Fas met with Dubai-based Al-Arabiyya management to discuss his situation. According to media sources, Fas will continue to work for Al Arabiyya, possibly with his own program broadcast from Dubai. Fas is scheduled to return from Lebanon on October 28 and IRPO will follow up then.

MBC Facing Iranian Backlash on Al Arabiyya Coverage

15. (C) On 9/14, IRPOffs met with Mazen Hayek, Group Director of Marketing at Al-Arabiya's parent, Middle East Broadcasting (MBC), who told us Fahs' expulsion from the station's Al-Arabiyya bureau in Tehran was "politically motivated." He cited Iran's accusation that the station unfairly covered Iran's role in Hamas and Hizbollah activities. Iran does not have a specific grievance with Fahs, a seasoned journalist and the son of a Shi'a cleric. Rather, Hayek said, Iran was critical of Al-Arabiya's coverage of "Al-Mughniyya, Hamas, Hizbollah, and Iraq." Hayek said that Iran was sending a clear message to Saudi-owned MBC that "don't play with us anymore; we know what you are doing." Hayek said MBC had no immediate plans to replace Fahs in Tehran and would wait to see if tensions subsided before making a decision.

16. (C) Hayek's enthusiasm for MBC's activities in Iran, including the launch of the new satellite movie channel MBC Persian, has waned compared to our previous meetings with him in light of these recent developments. MBC has not received any

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indication that Iran will try to close the Al Arabiyya bureau in Tehran or pressure the UAE government to halt its broadcasts into Iran. But Hayek, a Lebanese citizen who often steers discussions toward his native country and Iranian support for Hizbollah and Hamas, speculated that MBC could suffer more backlashes from the Iranian government. He said that an Al-Arabiyya correspondent in Iraq was targeted in a foiled roadside bomb plot (NFI), and said MBC and Al Arabiya staff in Beirut had recently been warned to be vigilant against possible Hizbollah or Iranian action.

Iranian Redlines on Foreign Media Nothing New

17. (C) Fahs' expulsion is not the first time Iran has criticized foreign media outlets. A 2004 article from Tehran Times, "Al-Jazeera's Psyops," berates the station for being a "Zionist agent" that tries to "divide Islamic countries and tarnish the image of Islam." The article responded harshly to a political cartoon by the network of a cleric who dismisses various problems of the Muslim world, but reacts forcefully to the term "Arab Gulf" over the preferred "Persian Gulf." In April 2005, Iran shut down Al-Jazeera's bureau in Iran for fourteen months after allegations that the station's coverage of clashes in the southwestern oil city of Ahvaz incited further violence. Similarly, in July 2008, Iranian authorities refused to renew the visa of the Iran deputy bureau chief of Agence France Presse, Stuart Williams.

18. (U) Some politicians have appealed to parliament to take swift action against any media outlet that criticizes the country, perceiving it as improper journalistic conduct. Opponents to foreign outlets appear to conflate criticism on Iran's policies with an attack against Islam. According to Iranian press, a member of the parliamentary National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, Javad Jahangirzadah, exhorted the Ministry of Culture to respond to Al-Arabiyya: "Our entire

national and international dignity, symbolized by the Imam Khomeini, is not meant to be attacked by a news report while we give a mild response. The issue right now is why have state bodies remained silent in the face of Al-Arabiyya's violation?"

¶9. (C) Iran has responded to foreign media outlets by serving its domestic market its own state-run entertainment channels. A month after the launch of MBC Persian, which broadcasts American movies with Persian subtitles via satellite, the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) announced its launch of an independent around-the-clock network dedicated to movies subtitled in Arabic for audiences around the region. Similarly, Star TV's Sanjay Das told IRPOff that his company's market research found half-cooked attempts by IRIB channels to imitate popular games and talk shows to counter the original version exported from abroad. IRIB's new programs are part of its five-year plan to produce more domestic and international channels, according to Iranian Press.

¶10. (C) Comment: Despite Iran's best efforts, the government cannot stem media interest in Iran, indicated by foreign media outlets continued interest in the country. Hayek described the appeal of Iran's TV market as its large and influential youth population, almost 30 million strong. Furthermore, Hayek said, the satellite market can only stand to grow, not diminish. IRIB predicts that 23 million people have uncontrolled access to satellite channels and this number will most likely grow. The market potential appeals to media companies that seek to leverage the demand for entertainment not met by the state-controlled IRIB. Meanwhile, the recent events with Al-Arabiya staff in Iran suggest that the current Iranian regime is aware of its vulnerability to outside influences and objective news reporting. IRPO believes that Fahs' expulsion is one indicator that the government is nervous about fissures in its ability to control the flow of information in and out of Iran.ASGARD